

## POINTS OF INTEREST

*Historical Landmarks (WV)*

# Merom Institute among county landmarks

### MEROM INSTITUTE

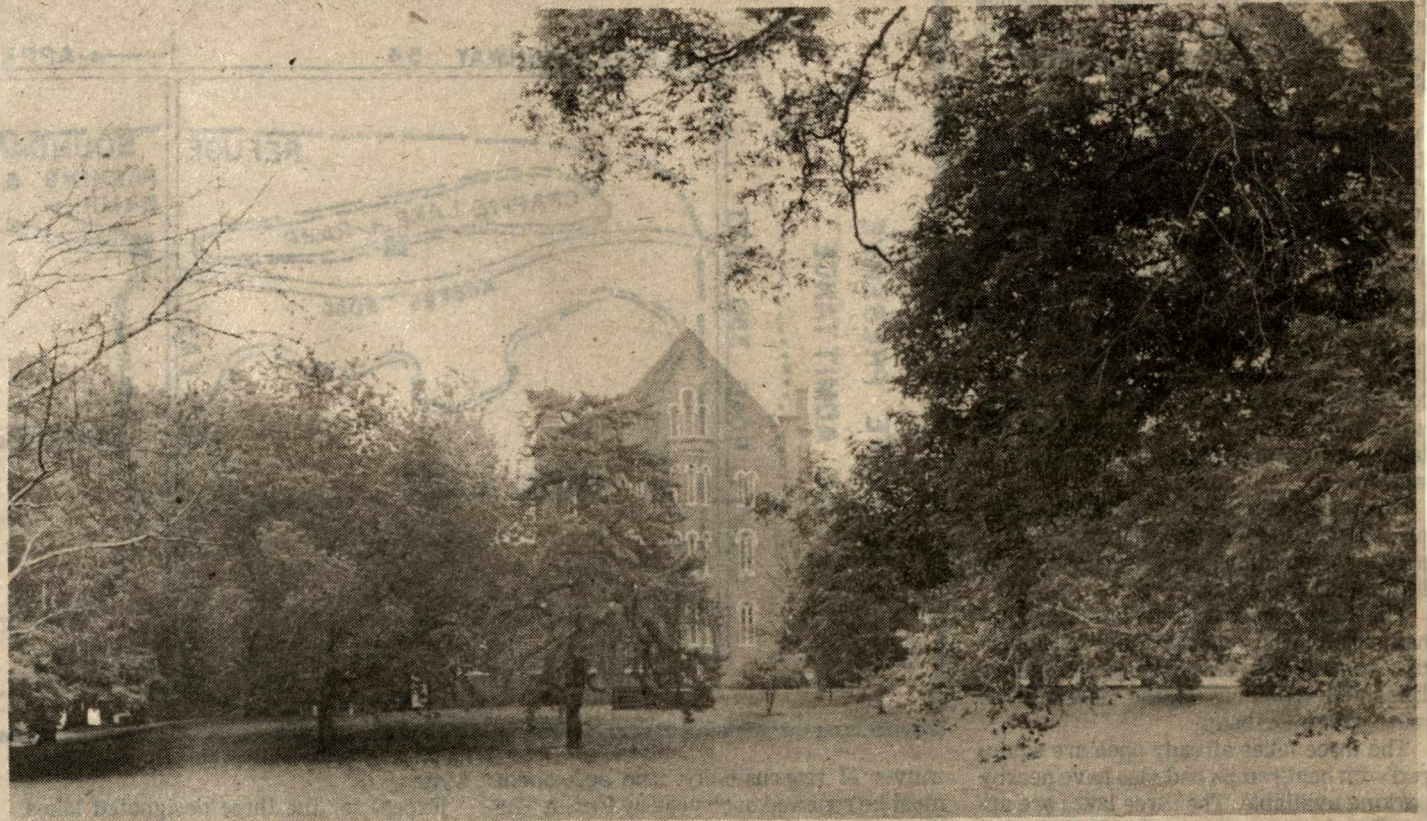
Sullivan County's most famous structure rests high on a hill in Merom. Merom Institute, a Gothic-Romanesque structure 109 feet long, 65 feet wide and 128 feet tall, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Located southeast of the Bluff, Merom Institute started as Union Christian College in 1858. A convention of delegates of the Christian Church met on November 4, 1858, at Peru and decided to recommend the establishment of an institution of learning in Indiana. Logansport, Sullivan and several other places asked for the college, but a committee selected Merom with Union Christian College adopted as its name.

The first sessions of the new college were held in the old courthouse, abandoned after the county seat moved to Sullivan. The current five-story building, constructed by Thomas Kearns of Merom, was not completed until 1862.

An accredited school, Union Christian College had an average attendance of 125, with the students living within a radius of 40 to 50 miles. In 1884, the salary of the president of the school was \$1,000 per year, and that of teachers ranged from \$400 to \$800 per year.

The college stayed open until 1924, with the buildings being used only occasionally since that time. Under the Congregation of



The Merom Institute is one of the county's landmarks.

Christian Churches, which later became the United Church of Christ, the college

became Merom Institute in 1936.

The institute offers marriage enrich-

ment programs and a facility for use by other organizations.

REFERENCE  
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# Reviving Merom

Historic Landmarks  
(WV)

## Owners seek renewed interest in gem of a historic landmark

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Merom, Ind — For years the old Merom Institute has been one of Sullivan County's least known architectural and historical jewels.

Now the United Church of Christ has launched a crusade to increase the 125-year-old building's public luster by bringing more religious and secular activities to this tiny former college campus in a small grove overlooking the Wabash River.

Although the institute, now called a conference center, includes a large dining hall, cabins, chapel, gymnasium and extensive grounds, the name is almost synonymous with the main building, a five-story brick structure with a cupola. It has been a landmark in Merom since it was completed in 1863.

Today, while the entire complex seeks a higher profile, the building is undergoing a renewal of its own. Some restoration is under way and more is planned.

That is one reason the revival is not only spiritual, but economic. Finances are vital to improving the layout; the old boiler system alone takes an estimated \$16 an hour to operate.

And expanding usage fits not only the funding scheme, but the historic role of the conference center. It long has served any denomination and any community function.

"It's always been a church-related institute, to serve the whole church. That's been a capsule of the vision," said the Rev. C. Patrick Russell, director of the center.

The Merom Conference Center has activities scheduled for less than half the available time, except for the busy summer season, said Russell.

It is used for clerical meetings, training sessions and get-away weekends. It also welcomes

reunions, weddings, anniversary parties, banquets and picnics.

In summer, when regular church camps dot the schedule, a staff of 20 is needed.

When visitors are absent, there is work to be done.

"We clean, clean, clean," said cook Faye Pirtle. "But we get a lot of visitors, especially historical people who see it on the historical map."

The center was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

Its link with the past is part of its charm. That is apparently part of the reason for its increased popularity, said Russell. Merom is too far off the beaten track.

"There are people in the county who have never been here," he said.

Recently 260 letters were distributed within a 50-mile radius to increase awareness, said institute secretary Nancy Waterman.

"We're trying to increase usage rather than raising the prices," she said.

In 1851, the Rev. E.W. Humphreys founded Merom Bluff Academy, meeting in the former Sullivan County Courthouse, left vacant when the county seat was moved to Sullivan. While providing a general high school-level education to students in the area, he dreamed of a college.

In 1858, the Western Indiana Conference of the New Light Christian Church adopted Rev. Humphreys' college idea and construction of the Union Christian College hall was begun in 1859. Rev. Humphreys became a faculty member.

The town pledged \$35,000, more than was offered by Sullivan, Richmond, Kokomo, Lebanon or Peru.

The building was finished in 1863. Its barn-like top floor and unusual, tall spiral staircase

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leading to the cupola were to become romances for graduates. More than one high-mile proposal of marriage was made from the cupola. Over the years the upstairs became inscribed with a maze of initials and names dating back 100 years and more.

Returning alumni still climb the stairs for a view of the town, the Wabash River and the decade-old Turtle Creek Reservoir, which creeps to within about a mile of the east side of the campus.

When it opened, the hall provided a general college education, with good schools in music, art and business, and an emphasis on theological education in preparation for the ministry.

In 1910-11, a residence hall for 70 women was added, but it later burned. The present chapel and gymnasium were completed in 1920.

Changing times closed the college in 1924. Its rural location, dwindling support and transportation improvements which carried students to larger, more distant schools, contributed to its dissolution into receivership.

For 12 years, the school struggled through sporadic use for conferences and outings.

In 1936, it was renamed Merom Institute. It passed through several church organizations until 1977 when the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, United Church of Christ, took over ownership, which continues today.

During the early 1940s, the institute became a rallying center for conscientious objectors, who built the nine cabins used today and expressed their philosophy in a mural which survives in the dining hall.

In 1984, the institute's name was changed to Merom Conference Center.

Merom citizens regularly roller skate in the gymnasium, which has a skate rental program.

Weddings take place both in the chapel and in an outdoor worship center.

The ground floor of the old hall has been made into offices and a lounge. Some office space is rented out.

The second floor contains a large meeting room. Its most striking feature is a huge conference table from the home of Dr. Arthur E. Holt, once president of the institute's board.

Two former classrooms may be renovated, one as it appeared when students were there, the other as a museum of college-institute memorabilia.

Income provided through increased usage, officials hope, will provide funds to perpetuate Merom hall's history.